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1989

## Arts Institutions on The Great Plains: An Introduction

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Geske, Norman A., "Arts Institutions on The Great Plains: An Introduction" (1989). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 401.

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# ARTS INSTITUTIONS ON THE GREAT PLAINS

## AN INTRODUCTION

The papers in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* were presented at the symposium "The Arts on the Plains: The Role of Institutions," held 16-18 March 1988. The Nebraska Art Association, celebrating its one hundredth anniversary, collaborated in hosting the conference. The conference focused the Association's review of its own scope and impact by establishing a context of comparable efforts by other organizations, institutions, and individuals in the Great Plains and adjacent states. The six papers that follow illustrate the breadth of that comparison.

Our hope that the conference would stimulate the scholarly study of the various cultural institutions that have established and supported the arts in the American West was not disappointed. The history of cultural institutions has largely remained unexplored by scholars, and many of the papers presented at the conference were, indeed, groundbreaking. The conference program presented, perhaps for the first time, topics that illuminate in very different ways the need for cultural expression in frontier society and the ways in which both individuals and institutions acted to satisfy that need.

Howard Lamar's keynote address, "Seeing More Than Earth and Sky," the lead article of this issue, is a masterly summing up of the impulses inherent in frontier society that sought to satisfy an appetite for something more than the bare practicalities of existence. From the beginning of white advance onto the Plains, settlers and travelers possessed an awareness of the intangible values that are independent of necessity. Individuals championed such values first. Artists accompanied scientific and military expeditions; settlers sought to relate themselves to a new environment; and artist-teachers arrived early to depict and instruct the pioneer communities. Eventually patron-collectors and arts institutions developed from this activity. It is in these institutions, the colleges and universities, libraries and archives, academies of art and music, the traditions of religious sects, and the associations of citizens, like the Nebraska Art Association, that the developments of the last hundred years find their story.

While Howard Lamar provides an overview of "the rise of a Great Plains aesthetic," Frederick Hoxie describes how one individual, Edward E. Ayer, shaped what we know about the

American Indians by his enthusiastic and imaginative but disciplined collection of a remarkable body of American Indian art now housed at the Newberry Library. Thomas O'Sullivan describes the results, intended and unintended, of the first New Deal program to support the arts, the Public Works of Art Project, as it took shape in Minnesota. In his discussion of the development of private art collections into the great twentieth-century museums of the American Southwest, Keith L. Bryant describes the careers and aesthetics of a number of men and women who, like Edward Ayer, institutionalized their own collecting philosophies in museums that will continue to determine what the public sees. Finally, in two companion articles, Robin Tryloff and Sarah

Rosenberg discuss the growth of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as their state affiliates.

Taken as a whole, the 1988 conference was an occasion that not only recognized the achievement of one of the important institutions of its kind on the Great Plains but also set out an agenda for the future exploration of our cultural history. The publication of these articles is the next step into that future.

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